

Frank Sinatra's War with the World

by Peer J. Oppenheimer

Our Hollywood reporter turns front-line correspondent when he dares to interview the explosive battler from Hoboken.

I FELT LIKE I was against the wall, waiting for the firing squad to ready arms. Or, remembering back, like a kid waiting to see the school principal on a hooky charge.

"Call him Mister," I kept saying to myself. "Call him Mister."

I was in the Cardozo Hotel in Miami Beach, pencil and paper ready for an interview. I've interviewed hundreds of celebrities — plenty tough ones, too. Why, then, should the pencil shake so?

"If he takes a swing at me, I'll swing back," I told myself. "But I'll call him Mister when I do."

A flunky approached me. "Mister Sinatra will see you now." So here it was. The den of lions. I went forth.

Frank Sinatra has a quick smile and a likable manner. After talking to him, you understand why many people label him "a great guy." But you never forget to call him Mister, and you never refer to his unhappy loves or public brawls.

If you play it Frankie's way, an interview goes smoothly, if dully. Never lower your guard, though. The Voice has so many hot spots, you might ignite him without realizing it. Sinatra considers questions about his career, if respectfully asked, fair game, so I bravely sallied forth along this front.

"You've been criticized, Mr. Sinatra, for not rehearsing your scenes before actual shooting. In your new film, 'A Hole in the Head,' I hear you sort of unnerved Edward G. Robinson, who likes plenty of rehearsing before a take."

"We all have different ways of working," Frankie replied serenely. "I don't believe in exhausting my

emotions before the take. On the other hand, I read the script 50 times before I ever go to work. So you can't say I'm unprepared."

As for acting itself, Frank, an Academy Award winner, appears sincerely humble. He says he has private prints of almost all his films, which he reruns to learn what he must do to become a better performer. He seems genuinely happy to be cast with an actor of Robinson's stature. Someday, Sinatra wants to direct movies. But Broadway holds no lure.

"No matter how successful we'd be on opening night," he said, "I'd probably say, 'Be seeing you, boys...' and take off. No, sir, I wouldn't want to be tied down like that!"

For a moment Sinatra sounded like Sinatra. For the most part, our talk had been like a tea with Ethel Barrymore. Yet the fire that makes Sinatra the most hot-tempered person in Hollywood, and at times the most captivating, is never fully hidden. Frank has spent too much time bringing it to a fine flame to have a few moments of tranquility put it out.

WHY THE BELLIGERENCE? Well, through the years the answer has changed. Considering Frank's mercurial career, it probably will change again.

When Frank was a boyish crooner sending bobby-soxers into swoons, the press heard that he was a tough kid from a hoodlum neighborhood in Hoboken, N. J. He had fought poverty all his life and seemed headed for a life of crime until his interest in music saved him. If he seemed bellicose, it was this rough-and-tumble background.

The story was the kind America liked to read. And it was the kind Frankie wanted to believe. Next to being known as a "ladies' man," he was striving to be acknowledged as a "tough guy," and in the following stage of his unpredictable career he determined to prove both points.

When his popularity on the screen and on records nose-dived, Sinatra compensated by turning his personal attention from his wife, Nancy, and their three children to a score of Hollywood beauties. His two-year courtship of Ava Gardner was front-page news and spelled the end of his first marriage and the opening of an all-out war with anybody in the world who dared question his values.

Sinatra thought it shocking that newsmen should snoop on his three-continent love affair with beautiful Ava, and in 1951 his car almost ran down photographers and reporters — some extremely friendly toward him — who tried to get an interview with the couple at a Los Angeles airport.

There were also night-club brawls with gossip columnists and public-relations men and an endless series of childish name-calling duels with anybody who questioned Sinatra's behavior.

Reporters became more curious. Who is this guy who runs us over and calls us liars — and other things? they asked. A tough young punk? A poverty-soured kid striking back blindly?

Investigation indicated otherwise. The Sinatra family of Hoboken was dominated by a politically powerful mother who saw to it that her husband had a steady job on the city fire department and that her son had the best, if most "sissified," clothes available. Gangsters? Well, Hoboken was no place for a skinny kid in Lord Fauntleroy clothing, which Frankie sometimes wore. But it was no spawning ground for Dead End kids, either.

No, Frankie's dream world of life-and-death among the slum-dwellers didn't hold up. It was amusing then to see him surround himself with internationally known hoodlums, strong-arm punks, and alleged fight-fixers. It was not amusing to see him use his associates' bully-boy tactics on everyone from waiters to columnists, studio flunkies to big-shot executives.

Nancy divorced her husband of 12 years in 1951 and Frankie immediately married Ava. But Ava, one of the world's most desirable women, is no cure-all for a man's problems. There followed two years of marital explosions and finally a breakup.

Frank, however, was battling more than women and the world press. He was battling for his career, and it's to his credit that he turned almost certain defeat into a glorious victory on this front, at least. He camped at the doorstep of producer Harry Cohn, demanding to do the part of Maggio in "From Here to Eternity." Against all odds, he won the part at a



Persistence won Frank the role of Maggio (above) and a wife, Ava Gardner (right)—but not any lasting happiness.

